

Plan Express

Frequently Asked Questions

- **Question 1: What is Plan Express?**

Most Commercial plans are required to be submitted for full review. Plan Express allows for certain projects to be reviewed faster than usual, often in less than half the normal time. This is accomplished because only certain, limited projects are reviewed in Plan Express. For example: a hazardous occupancy group, or a large multi-story building would not qualify for Plan Express review, but a moderately-sized retail store or a small office building normally would. These types of projects are usually less Code-intensive, and can therefore be processed faster. For a complete list of projects that qualify, see the Plan Express personnel.

- **Question 2: How does the Plan-Express process work?**

(Step 1) Explanation of the “Lottery” system, and advance preparation by the Customer:

Plan Express only accepts a limited number of plans each week (currently 30). For each week containing holidays, the number of plans is reduced (currently by 6) for each day that is a holiday. The plans are selected by means of a “Lottery” system, which is conducted on Monday (or the first business day) of each week. The Lottery ensures that every person who is in line on time on Monday morning has an equal chance of having his or her plans accepted; and no one will feel compelled to arrive earlier than 7:00 a.m. to “beat the crowd.”

The doors open to the public at 7:00 a.m., so please plan to arrive sometime between then and 7:20 to be sure that you will be on time. Applicants are required to be in line before the bell rings at 7:30 a.m. If anyone arrives after the bell rings, we will not be able to grant them a place in line.

All customers who are planning to utilize the Plan Express service shall ensure that all required plan sets and documents are ready, and all other requirements for Plan Express submittal have been met, by the last business day of the week prior to the Lottery day on which they desire to submit their plans (for a full explanation of required plans, documents, and procedures see Question 4). Note: it is of vital importance that you meet all the requirements *before* arriving for the Lottery. No exceptions can be made once the bell rings and preliminary screening has begun.

(Step 2) Preliminary screening and project acceptance:

When the bell rings at 7:30, each person in line will be asked to provide their application and their plans for preliminary qualification. If the project appears to qualify, your name and project number will be written on a list. After every person in line has been pre-qualified, a number will be drawn at random. That person will then become number 1 on the list, and the people in line after that person will be taken in order, until the full number of plans for the week has been filled. This completes the Lottery process.

(Step 3) Fee calculation and assignment of a “Log-in day”:

Once the Lottery process is complete, each person who was accepted will be provided with routing sheets to fill out, and will be asked to drop off their plans. At this time, all applicants must provide us with a phone number where they can *easily* be reached. The plans will then be previewed to establish whether the projects do indeed qualify for Plan Express, and to calculate the Express fees (see Question 3 regarding Express fees). The plans will then be divided into equal batches to be logged into the system one batch at a time each day for the rest of that week’s Lottery cycle (the actual day that your plan is logged into the system will depend on where you were in line after the random drawing. For example, if you were among the first few selected, your plans will be logged in the following day. But if you were among the last few, they will not be logged in until the first business day of the following week).

Once your Plan Express fee is calculated, you will be contacted and informed of the amount, and you will be informed which day your plan is scheduled to be logged in. It is critical that you pay the fee and bring the receipt to Plan Express no later than 4:00 p.m. on the day your plans are scheduled to be logged in! We will “validate” the receipt by applying a date-stamp showing the target due date for completing the plan review. If the Plan Express fee is not paid on time, or if you forget to have Plan Express validate your receipt, your plans will not be logged in and you will lose your slot for that week! If this happens, you will need to start all over again in the Lottery on the following Monday.

(Step 4) The review process:

Once the plans are logged into the system, they are assigned to a Plan Analyst and are added to his or her list to be worked in the order received. The target for completion of the review process is seven business days, starting with the day your plan is actually logged into the system. In some cases, it may require a few extra days. For example: if review by the Haz-mat section or Floodplain Management is required, this may sometimes extend the process by a few days. However, you will always be contacted immediately when your plans are ready for pick-up. Please do not call the Plan Analysts and ask about the status of your plans. This only interrupts their work and slows the process down for everybody. Rest assured that you will be called as soon as your plans are ready. There is an automated number **(713.525.7000)** that you may call if you wish to monitor the progress of your plans at any time during the process. Or you may visit our department website (www.houstonpermits.com) for up-to-the minute information about your project.

If you have not heard from us within a day or so after the target due date that is stamped on your receipt, then it is possible that we have been unable to reach you and you should then call the Plan Express main number **(713.535.7766)** to inquire about your plans. But remember: Please do not call Plan Express personnel to ask about the status of your plans until at least the day after the target due date that is stamped on your receipt.

If your plans are not approved, you will be informed of this at the time you are called. The reasons will be provided in writing, and will be with the plans. When you pick up the plans you may read the comments at that time. Please do not ask the person calling to explain why the plans were not approved. He or she will only be able to tell you which sections have approved them. You may also call the automated number **(713.525.7000)** to request that the comments be faxed to you, or you may read the comments by visiting our website (www.houstonpermits.com).

- **Question 3: How much is the Plan Express fee, and when do I pay it?**

The fee is based on a percentage of the permit cost. When your plans are dropped off and previewed, we will calculate how much the actual building permit will cost. The Express fee will be 65% of that cost, or a minimum of thirty-five dollars (whichever is greater), plus a five-dollar administrative fee. The Plan Express fee must be paid prior to your scheduled log-in date (see Step 3 of Question 2 regarding the log-in date), and then the full permit fee will be paid after the plans are approved. So all together, you will have paid a total of 165% of the normal building permit cost (or the normal building permit cost plus the minimum forty-dollar Express fee) when the process is complete. The Express fee is *not* a part of the permit fee, and is not credited toward that amount. It is an additional fee that is assessed for using the Plan Express service (see the quote from 2000 IBC sec. 117.1.12 on page 4).

- **Question 4: What do I need to bring in order to submit my plans at Plan Express?**

You will need all three of the following:

(1) Four complete sets of plans. Each of the four sets shall be identical, which means that they must each contain all of the same pages and required documents, in the same order. All sets must be *securely bound* in an acceptable manner, and all additional required construction documents must be *securely attached* to them, before the plans can be submitted. This is necessary because the plan sets are distributed to several review sections simultaneously, and each section must be able to review the same information.

(2) A completed permit application form. All required information must be filled out, and the form must then be presented to a Customer Service Representative for verification, notarization, and the issuance of a project number. Plan Express cannot accept an application that is incomplete, not notarized, or does not have a valid project number.

(3) A letter from the architect (or designer, i.e. the person who drew the plans), or from the owner of the business for whom the construction work is being done. Only one individual or permit service may be named as the contact person in the letter, and all subsequent communications from City personnel regarding the project will be directed only to that individual or permit service. Note: if you are the architect (or designer), or the owner of the business, you do not need this letter, but you may be asked to provide evidence that you are the architect (designer) or owner.

Note: Since the Customer Service section is not open at the time the Express Lottery begins, all of these things must be ready *before* you come to Plan Express to get in line for submittals, which means the applicant shall ensure that they are ready *by the last business day of the preceding week*. The last page of this handout is a detailed checklist of the required items and procedures for submittal.

- **Question 5: How long does the review process take?**

See Step 4 of Question 2.

- **Question 6: When may I submit my plans?**

See Step 1 of Question 2.

- **Question 7: I was not accepted in the Lottery. What do I do now?**

You may submit the plans for standard Commercial plan review with the Customer Service Representatives in the main lobby, and try to get into Plan Express again the following week. If you choose this option, keep a copy of the application form (*front and back!*) and two sets of the plans to bring with you to Plan Express the following week. Turn in the original application and the other two sets.

If you are successful in the Lottery the following week, we will accept the two sets of plans you still have. We will then ask you to retrieve the other two sets of plans and the original application form from Commercial Plan Review on the 2nd floor. *You must bring back the other two sets and the original application at or before the time you bring us your Express fee receipt for validation, or your plans will not be accepted. You must bring back the **original** items from Commercial Plan Review, not additional copies! The originals themselves may contain approval stamps or other information that is needed for accurate review and processing by Plan Express.*

Note: You may make more than one attempt to get your project into Plan Express in this way, but it is suggested that if you have not made it in by the third attempt, it would be more beneficial to just allow the regular process to proceed with the plans that are already submitted, because by that time the plans should be close to being completely reviewed.

- **Question 8: I have made the required corrections. How and when can I have my plans reviewed again?**

Plans may be resubmitted anytime between 8:00 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday (except Holidays). Bring back *all four sets of plans*. Do not combine the four sets into two. Also, the person(s) responsible for making the corrections shall provide a detailed response letter, itemized to match the correction-comment lists. Each response shall explain what actions were taken to correct the item, and shall also explain where the new or corrected information can be found for review. *The written response letter is required and will be requested when you resubmit. Plans brought back without a response letter will not be accepted for resubmittal.* Note: at the discretion of the Plan Analysts or their supervisors, some minor comments may not require a response letter. Check with them if you are unsure.

You will be asked to fill out resubmittal route sheets. The yellow one will go with the original application, and is placed with the two sets that are marked “XX”. The red one will go with the photocopy of the application, and is placed with the other two sets. If none of the sets are marked “XX”, or if you do not have four sets, please explain

this to the person who is helping you, and he or she will explain what to do in that case. If requested, we will also re-stamp your receipt with the new due date at this time.

Resubmitted plans go back to the original Plan Analyst assigned, and are then added to his or her list to be worked in the order received. Both new and resubmitted plans are on the same list together, and all are worked in the order received. The review time is the same as for new plans: a target of seven business days. Note: if only one or two sections need to review them again, it may be less than seven days, but you must allow for the possibility of the full seven due to the fact that the plans are worked in the order received, and in which they appear on the Plan Analyst's list. No plan will be moved ahead of others on the list simply because it only needs to be reviewed by one or two sections. However, in some cases arrangements may be made for faster processing (see the Question 9 for a discussion of this subject). Note: the "seven-day" rule does not apply on (and after) the third submittal. At that point, there is no guarantee of a required completion time (see the quote from 2000 IBC sec. 117.1.12 below).

- **Question 9: I only needed to make a few minor corrections. Is there any way to have my plans reviewed faster, or can I walk them through?**

If there are only minor corrections, you may ask to speak with the Plan Analyst for each section needed (electrical, HVAC, etc). If there are corrections needed for Structural as well as one or more of the M.E.P.'s, then see the M.E.P.'s first, and Structural last.

It will be up to the discretion of each Plan Analyst to decide if they can "walk through" the corrections. If they feel that it can be done quickly (ten minutes or so), they will allow you to do it. If not, they will ask you to resubmit per normal procedure.

If the Structural Plan Analyst looks at your corrections and sees that the plans can be approved, and all other sections have already done so, he or she may still ask you to resubmit them for final processing. However, he or she will attach a special notification to the front of the resubmittal route sheet that will allow for the plans to be processed by the next business day.

- **Question 10: What are the business hours for Plan Express?**

We are open from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday (except Holidays) for general business. However, the hours for certain specific functions are limited. See the Plan Express Customer Service Representative for details.

The preceding policies are based upon the following information, quoted from Section 117.1.12 of the 2000 International Building Code as adopted and revised by the City of Houston:

"The fee for expedited service shall be 65 percent of the building permit fee calculated as provided in Section 117.2. This fee shall be separate from, and in addition to, the structural permit fee.

If for any reason the building official is not able to complete the review of any set of plans for which the expedited review fee has been paid, and approve or disapprove the same within seven days of their receipt (Saturdays, Sundays and jurisdiction-observed holidays excluded), then the applicant shall, upon written request therefore, be entitled to a refund of the expedited review fee.

Exception: Any processing delay for required plan review by other jurisdiction departments not under control of the building official, shall not be charged to the seven-day review time.

Payment of the expedited review fee allows review of the plans in the form presented at the time the fee is paid, and one additional review in the event the drawings must be corrected to comply with this code or other applicable laws. The payment shall not entitle the applicant to expedited review of any further revisions to the plans."

Plan Express Lottery

Required Items Checklist

You must have *all* of the following in hand *before* getting in line for the Lottery. If anything listed below is missing or incomplete, then you are *not ready, and should not be in line*.

- 1) A fully-completed permit application form.**
 - a) All required sections shall be completed.**
 - b) Total value of the project.**
 - c) Total square footage if it is a new building or addition.**
 - d) Project number.**
 - e) Affidavit (back side) completed & notarized. If there are no deed restrictions, this shall be verified on the front by the signature of the C.S.R. who issued the project number.**
- 2) Four complete sets of plans.**
 - a) All sets complete, all sets match.**
 - b) Copies of Energy Code Compliance forms, etc. securely attached to the front of each set.**
 - c) Plans rolled up into two rolls, with two sets in each roll.**
- 3) If you are not the designer of the plans, or the owner of the building (or the owner of the proposed tenant business), you must also have a letter from one of those individuals specifically authorizing you by name to be the applicant for the permit.**

Exceptions for transfers:

If your project is being transferred into Plan Express from the regular commercial review division, then you only need two of the plan sets with you. The other two can be brought in to us afterwards. However, you must still have the completed application form (or at least a photocopy, *front and back*), with all of the above information as required, and all other above-listed requirements shall be in order.